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Before the Higher Education Committee

*In Support of **SB 936: An Act Concerning Workforce Development** with additions*

Senator Slap, Representative Haddad, and members of the Committee, my name is Damien Nuzzo, I'm a nurse clinician at the Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services and I live in Wallingford.

The state of Connecticut is in a mental health and addiction crisis. The demand for services is unprecedented. We have a health care staffing shortage that needs creativity, ingenuity, and is transformative.

This staffing crisis is due to the decades of disinvestment in the public sector. Years ago, former governor Jodi Rell suspended the licensed practical nurse adult education program that was producing about 350 licensed practical nurses every 16 months. We have not been able to reinstate that program since, and the crisis continues to balloon.

With this level of demand, we need to communicate with colleges weekly and get significant commitments to channel nurses to the state facilities. This requires real investment, but it is necessary. We are in a crisis.

If you want to save lives, we need to establish pipelines from schools to state facilities. Students need to be exposed to this public sector work – mental, psychiatric, and substance abuse care. I would not have thought in a million years that I would be in psych. This is different from traditional nursing, we provide a multidisciplinary approach, which means we deal with clients and patients of all backgrounds and needs. The local doctor's offices are likely to not have the expertise to provide for someone with acute mental health needs, and because there are barely any nurses at DCF Solnit South many kids are languishing in emergency room rooms. It's been all over the news.

If we don't invest in making sure that pipelines are established, these clients will continue to end up in the ER – driving costs up. It's cheaper to invest in the beginning than the end – preventative care versus reactive care.

We have kicked the ball down the road long enough. We cannot continue to fail at building an infrastructure that cares for these individuals. We need to "Grow Our Own" – identify mental health workers and licensed practical nurses – cultivate them, provide career mobility, and they are more likely to stay with us. We need to incentivize health

care workers to work in the classrooms - right now, it's more lucrative to work on the floor than teach a class of 16 - and we need to create Preceptor programs to mentor new nurses. Invest in our workforce by utilizing the current one. We have a lot to offer. Thank you for your time.